

The Concept of 'Working People'*

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Abstract

This article interrogates the concept of 'working people'. Lenin and other classical Marxists commonly used terms like labouring people, working people, or rural poor. Typically, they were used as descriptive, or, at best, as terms of political art rather than theoretical science. The inspiration in this article for the use of the term 'working people' comes from Walter Rodney. Building on previous work, the article relates the concept of working people to a modified definition of primitive accumulation under neo-liberalism, that is, as a process of surplus extraction by capital based on expropriation of a part of necessary consumption of the producer. It is argued that this is the material basis common to all sectors of what is here understood as working people.

Keywords

Working people; primitive accumulation; peasantry; Walter Rodney; Africa

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Marxist Tradition

In this short piece, I interrogate the concept of working people by tracing my own conceptual journey to arrive at the proposition put forth here. Needless to add that the journey was a collective enterprise of radical intellectuals who believed they were engaged in emancipatory politics and not the musings of an intellectual wanderer or a ‘revolutionary traveller’. (I borrow the term from John Saul (2010).) These snippets give me an opportunity to mention in passing some of the radical debates of the post-Arusha Declaration period at the leading University in Tanzania and for that matter in Africa.

Lenin and other classical Marxists commonly used terms such as labouring people, working people, rural poor and so on. Typically, they were used as descriptive or at best as terms of political art rather than theoretical science. We too used the term ‘working people’ in our debates as a short hand for worker–peasant alliance but never felt the need to theorize it. With the wisdom of hindsight, I can now see that even then practice demanded a theorization but we were too steeped in traditional Marxist frameworks to contemplate a departure from the ‘formula’ of the proletariat as the agency of the revolution. We were very familiar with the traditional categories of Marxist political economy—working class, bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, lumpen proletariat, etc. In a country where the most oppressed, and perhaps exploited, was the mass of the peasantry, we readily, if somewhat lazily, fell back on the Chinese formula of worker–peasant alliance led by the working class and where the working class itself was wanting in leadership, working class leadership was substituted by the leadership of the proletarian ideology (Shivji, 1976). Where would the proletarian ideology come from? Lenin gave the answer. The working class on its own is capable only of trade union consciousness; socialist consciousness is brought from outside their ranks by bourgeois intellectuals who have been exposed to a wider worldview (Lenin, 1970, p. 70).

Our own Marxist theoretician Amilcar Cabral, who led the anti-colonial liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau, argued that the struggle would of necessity be led by the petty bourgeoisie provided they committed class suicide. In a classical piece, *The Weapon of Theory* that remains relevant to this day, Cabral argued:

To retain the power which national liberation puts in its hands, the petty bourgeoisie has only one path: to give free rein to its natural tendencies to become more bourgeois, to permit the development of a bureaucratic and intermediary

bourgeoisie in the commercial cycle, in order to transform itself into a national pseudo-bourgeoisie, that is to say in order to negate the revolution and necessarily ally itself with imperialist capital. In order not to betray these objectives the petty bourgeoisie has only one choice: to strengthen its revolutionary consciousness, to reject the temptations of becoming more bourgeois and the natural concerns of its class mentality, to identify itself with the working classes and not to oppose the normal development of the process of revolution. This means that in order to truly fulfil the role in the national liberation struggle, the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie must be capable of committing suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers, completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which they belong. (<https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/cabral/1966/weapon-theory.htm>)

Cabral did not live long enough to witness the miserable failure of the 'revolutionary petty bourgeoisie' of national liberation to commit suicide; instead, it went along the first path of turning itself into a voracious pseudo-bourgeoisie whether in or outside the state. The rude interruption of neoliberalism blew the lid off of whatever was left of its nationalist pretensions as it embraced imperialist dictates lock, stock and barrel resuming the plunder of natural and human resources of the colonial era. But let me return to the journey.

Rodney's Inspiration

The inspiration for the use of the term 'working people' came from Walter Rodney. Rodney taught at the University of Dar es Salaam for eight years in the Department of History (Shivji, 2012). He was one of the leading participants in student struggles and an active, albeit non-card carrying member of the University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF) which published the well-known student radical journal *Cheche* (Hirji, 2010). When he returned to his native Guyana, he formed his party and called it 'Working People's Alliance' (WPA). The party was the first that brought together working people from the Indian and African communities and had a collective leadership, though, of course, Rodney remained its iconic leader.

I used the term in the book I edited called *The State and the Working People in Tanzania* (Shivji, 1986b), which contained articles by young radical researchers exploring the transformation of the Tanzanian state and its relationship with the working people under the ideology of Nyerere's Ujamaa. The central thesis of the book was to show that the

Tanzanian state had established its ideological and organizational hegemony over the working people (working class, peasantry and students) and in the process had become a centralized, authoritarian party-state. The term working people was used loosely as a composite noun to designate working class, peasants, lower petty bourgeoisie, etc., but not theorized as a concept. The need was not felt then, though rereading my introduction to the book today, I believe the germs of some paradigmatic shift in explaining the exploitation (not just oppression) of the peasant under capitalism were there. This was probably the first step leading to the conceptualization of working people. The argument was summarized thus:

The peasant constitutes the major source of surplus and as such is made to yield maximum surplus product. To maximise the rate of exploitation of the peasant producer, capital lets him retain ownership of the means of production and control over the labour process so that capital may be free from bearing the costs of peasant reproduction. But this in turn means that unlike a worker who yields surplus value by sheer operation of economic forces, the peasant has to be constantly subjected to extra-economic coercion so that he continues yielding surplus to capital. The major extra-economic force is state coercion. (Shivji, 1986, p. 8)

The argument that the peasant's exploitation by capital is predicated on the fact that exploitation cuts into the peasant's necessary consumption was first developed in our article that we did for a study group of Tanzanian and Ugandan comrades on the agrarian question.¹ The article was never published but I rehashed the position in my 'The exploitation of small peasant' (Shivji, 1983) and 'The Roots of Agrarian Crisis in Tanzania—A Theoretical Perspective' (Shivji, 1987). These writings try to explain the relation between the peasant and the state in the context of overall domination by imperialism, taking as its point of departure Lenin's definition of imperialism as the monopoly stage of capitalism (Lenin, 1999). Monopoly capital reaps super-profits—meaning over and above average profits—by establishing and reproducing control both at the level of production and the market. The control is rarely direct. 'It is often mediated through intermediaries, those classes and social groups in the dominated social formation who play the role of compradors'. (Shivji, 1987, p. 119). To be sure, the control is never absolute or complete. The process is contradictory. '[T]o the extent that commodity economy is a *soil* of capitalist relations and the fact that the peasant is involved in commodity production means that peasant differentiation does take place ...'. (Ibid., p. 126). This tendency, which I was later to

dub as ‘accumulation from below’ gets stuck, as it were, at the stage of rich peasant. Thus ‘capitalist development in agriculture appears as if it was in a transition which has been arrested’. (Ibid.) The conclusion was:

Since the surplus is siphoned off, there is very little accumulation in agriculture. The upper echelons of the peasantry move into commercial and merchant activities—transport, hotels, guesthouses etc. rather than in the direction of capitalist farming. The latter would require investment in technology and industrial inputs both of which have a high premium and are, therefore, ‘unprofitable’.

What is preserved and reproduced, therefore, is an impoverished, starving middle and poor peasantry which forms the backbone of agriculture production and the source of surplus for capital. (Ibid., p. 127)

The article foreclosed the possibility of the development of fully fledged agrarian capitalism in an African periphery. The capitalism of the periphery was variously labelled as truncated, arrested, perverse, etc. (Hadjivayanis, 1987; Rweyemamu, 1973). Since this was the time in Tanzania of the transition from the nationalist to the neoliberal period, the debate on IMF conditionalities packaged in structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) was rife. The 1987 article argued that with open markets, withdrawal of state subsidies, privatization of land-ownership, dismantling of single-channel marketing and a free ride for foreign investment, the country would return to the classical colonial-type agrarian economy. This time around it would be worse because we would witness a rapid Latin Americanization of Africa, as Nyerere would have caricatured it. We may as well quote the results of the IMF programme predicted by my 1987 article:

1. gradual concentration of prime agriculture land in the hands of large, foreign corporations specializing in traditional export crops (tea, coffee, cotton etc) and luxury food (fruits, vegetables and so on) for foreign markets (the Sahelian model). This scenario can be extended as the corporations specialize in meat and dairy products for the Middle-Eastern market. In short, tropical Africa would provide cheap land and labour, while finance capital would reap super-profit. ...
2. a quick development of a landless peasantry;
3. massive migration from rural to urban areas;
4. sprawling cities full of luxury, consumer goods with millions of marginalized unemployed lumpen masses living on the verge of starvation;
5. all the evils of child labour, prostitution, urban ghetto violence, etc.;
6. a political superstructure rabid with coups, assassination and pathetic subservience to foreign interests;

7. a tiny, local wealthy compradorial class shamelessly squeezing into the interstices of foreign multinationals as representatives, commission agents, real estate speculators, hoteliers and caterers, political brokers, etc.... (Ibid., p. 128)

This was written 30 years ago. Not all has come to pass, at least not in Tanzania, although it has come close. As a composite picture of the continent as a whole, however, the prophecy comes uncannily close to reality. One wishes though one would have been proved wrong! To be fair, the article did posit an alternative set of measures that would launch the country on a path towards what it called new democracy. It added a caveat that this was not a full new democratic programme. Such a programme ‘would assume a *fundamental* change in state power—a people’s power with worker–peasant alliance as the base under the leadership of the proletariat.’ (Ibid., p. 130). The last formulation is traditional. The concept of the working people has not yet entered the discourse. That was to come later with the second shift in paradigmatic focus, the focus now being on accumulation, what Marx called, the ‘Moses and the Prophets’ of the capitalist system.

Character and Trajectory of Accumulation

In 1990, the President of Tanzania appointed a Commission of Enquiry into Land Matters (Land Commission) which I had the honour to chair. This was the first land commission to be appointed after independence. The last Commission was in 1953–1955, the East African Royal Commission, appointed by the colonial government. In a comprehensive report, the gravamen of its recommendations on land was to create conditions for individualization of land and its negotiability to allow mobility of resources from uneconomic to economic hands, as it puts it (Ingham, 1955, ch. 23). In short, the underlying rationale was to create enabling environment for the development of a class of yeoman farmers. Nyerere, then the leader of the freedom movement Tanganyika African National Union, opposed it. So it never came to pass. For 40 years after independence, the land tenure system in essence remained as it was established by the colonial government in 1923 under the Land Ordinance (No. 3 of 1923).

Typical of the British legal tradition, the Land Ordinance was a masterpiece of legal craftsmanship. In less than 20 sections, it laid down the salient features of the land tenure system that endured for almost

three-fourths of a century. Tanganyika was ruled as a trust territory under the mandate of the League of Nations, later the United Nations, which stipulated the supremacy of 'native' interests. Unlike neighbouring Kenya which was a colony, where all lands were crown lands, in Tanganyika all lands were declared to be public lands and

all public lands and all rights over the same are hereby declared to be under the control and subject to the disposition of the Governor and shall be held and administered for the use and common benefit, direct or indirect, of the natives of the Territory, and no title to the occupation and use of any such lands shall be valid without the consent of the Governor. (Section 3)

In one fell swoop, the radical title or ultimate authority over land was vested in the state which had the discretionary powers over its allocation and use. Land was nationalized. The governor was empowered to grant rights of occupancy, a kind of lease, of up to 99 years to non-natives. A small settler population and other immigrant communities were given rights of occupancy while 'natives' continued to occupy land under their customary laws. Over a period of time, a doctrine of deemed right of occupancy was evolved by judicial interpretation. Courts held that natives occupied and used land by virtue of an implied consent of the governor that could be withdrawn at the governor's discretion. The land tenure system thus came to rest on a triangular relationship between the grantee of a right of occupancy who held titles, customary owners who had no titles and the state that was the custodian of radical title. The relationship between the state and the grantee was a legal relation governed by civil law; that between the state and the customary owner was an administrative relation governed by the state's policy and the relation between the grantee and a customary owner was hierarchical where the registered title was superior to a customary owner's claim. Customary laws governed the relation among customary owners. The arrangement was thus neat in law, although it did not always work as neatly on the ground. Nonetheless, the most important implication of the land tenure system was that the rights and claims of customary owners were not secured by law against the state. The security of the big majority of peasant and pastoral communities was precarious. As and when it suited the state, they continued to occupy the land producing food for themselves and cash crops for export under the pain of minimum acreage laws—an acre of food crops and acre of cash crop, for example—enforced by criminal sanctions, whereas the relation between a grantee of a right of occupancy and the state was legal governed by civil law

subject to civil remedy that between the state and customary owner was administrative governed by fiat and subject to criminal sanctions.

From the standpoint of political economy, the state stood in the shoes of a landlord in relation to occupiers with an entitlement to ground rent. In practice, grantees of rights of occupancy—foreign plantation companies and settlers—were charged minimal rent while the element of rent from customary owners was built into various taxes and tributes, including the so-called communal labour, an euphemism for forced labour, which was often extracted from rural communities under the guise of constructing public works. Labour for plantations, mines and public works was migratory recruited from labour reserves, a system akin to indentured labour. Labour was paid what was called a bachelor wage just enough to keep body and soul together and pay cash taxes like poll tax chargeable on every adult male above an apparent age of 18 years (see generally Shivji, 1986a). As the man worked on a plantation for a period of, say, nine months, the woman and children were working on family farms growing food and cash crops. The result was that the man was semi-proletarianized while the woman was peasantized, both subsidising capital which reaped super-profits. Surplus for capital cut into necessary consumption of the producer, man and woman, who lived sub-human lives while exerting super-human labour. This was a form of primitive accumulation of capital in all its essentials.

Evidence received by the Tanzania Land Commission showed that the main grievance of the rural community was insecurity of land tenure resulting in their customary lands being arbitrarily acquired by the state and its organs—parastatals, national parks, army, prisons, bureaucracy, etc.,—without their involvement or consultation. The commission interpreted this to imply that the demand of rural producers was democratization of the land tenure system in which they would fully participate in the allocation and use of land and broadly in decision-making over their natural resources. On the issue of security of tenure, the commission took the position that this could not be decided without first identifying the path and agency of development.

The commission argued that in the debates and discourses of the 1960s and 1970s, it was believed that the small peasant was destined to disappear and that the future lay in large scale, industrialized agriculture for reasons of efficiency and productivity. Tanzania experimented with such large-scale investment and they had proved to be miserable failures. Studies had shown that the legendary inefficiency and low productivity of the small peasant was not inherent; rather it was based on deliberate policy measures of the state—for example, ensuring supply of cheap

labour, charging minimal rent for land, subsidizing imports of inputs and so on—favouring large-scale producers at the expense of small one. In effect, the small-producer gave a hidden subsidy to the large ones. Such policies ‘simultaneously impoverished the peasant thus perpetuating the myth of his inefficiency and low productivity while raising the profits of the large-scale holder thus upholding the latter’s claim to superior economic performance’. (United Republic of Tanzania, 1994, p. 137).

Beginning from the premise that Tanzania was a country of small holders (it still is) and was likely to remain so in the foreseeable future, the Commission went on to recommend a land tenure structure based on providing security to the small producer while at the same time ensuring participation of peasant communities in the decision-making organs of the village. This is not the place to go into the details of the commission’s recommendations. Suffice it so that its central recommendation was to divest the state of its monopoly of radical title and diversify it. The radical title in village lands would be vested in their respective village assemblies (a body of all adult residents of a village) that would be constitutionally recognized as corporate bodies and the lowest rung of local government. The radical title in national lands would be held by a National Land Commission which would be accountable to the Parliament at national level. What is of immediate interest to this article is the Commission’s accumulation model which was summed up as follows. It needs to be quoted at length.

[T]he Commission recognises that there are forces within the peasant and pastoral communities capable of generating, accumulating and reinvesting capital in the rural sector. These forces develop spontaneously as a result of differentiation in the smallholder economy. In the literature, they are often described as ‘rich peasants’ or kulaks. We distinguish them from capitalist farmers. Unlike the latter, the former are not simply managers and supervisors but continue to work on their land. In the past, they were identified as ‘real exploiters’ and thus stifled and suppressed. We believe that at this stage of our development they are one possible agency of *accumulation from below* or a *national* agrarian and pastoral development, albeit capitalist.

... [I]t is quite conceivable that the rich peasantry can develop a voracious appetite for land at the expense of the large majority of the peasantry. That possibility informs our recommendations on fixing a statutory ceiling on land ownership on village lands, (Ibid., p. 138)

Accumulation from below was another way of denoting the classical Marxist process of accumulation by expanded reproduction. This position

is pregnant with the development of, and distinguishing between, two tendencies of accumulation, that is to say, accumulation by expanded reproduction and primitive accumulation, existing not sequentially as in Marx but contemporaneously, or side by side, albeit in tension and contestation. However, a fully fledged argument on this score had to wait another 20 years.

The 1990s and 2000s was marked by an intellectually insipid neo-liberal interregnum in the radical debates and discourse at the University and elsewhere. As the University was starved of resources, the faculty left in droves for greener pastures, others took up consultancies on policy research driven by donor funds and still others took off the gown and went to town to start or join donor-funded NGOs and think tanks. Basic research was undermined as theoretical debates were devalued (Chachage, 2016). Revolutionary standpoints and class perspectives gave way to eclectic activism as radicals jumped on agendas set by donor agencies.

In 2009, having retired from the University of Dar es Salaam, I published a small book *Accumulation in an African Periphery: A Theoretical Framework* (Shivji, 2009) under the sponsorship of REPOA (Research in Poverty Alleviation). Under the leadership of our dear friend, the late Sam Moyo, the African Institute for Agrarian Studies supported the publication. The book combined together the two theoretical shifts mentioned earlier. The two poles of the exploitation and accumulation were brought together which were: (a) at the level of production, the argument that the surplus extracted by capital cuts into the necessary consumption of the producer and (b) at the level of accumulation, the argument that the dominant form of accumulation in the neoliberal phase of capitalism in the periphery is primitive accumulation.

Besides the classical methods of primitive accumulation, like appropriation of peasant land and resources, it was argued that under neoliberalism primitive accumulation assumes new forms and becomes generalized in almost all sectors of the economy, including the so-called informal sector. The producer self-exploits him or herself just to survive while subsidizing capital.

[P]easant labour super-exploits itself by intensifying labour in multiple occupations and cutting down on necessary consumption (Moyo & Yeros, 2007, p. 84). Directly, or ultimately, the beneficiary is the dominant capital. The so-called informal sector, for example, providing meagre and fragile livelihoods to thousands of people in any African city, is a kind of subsidy to capital. By over-exploiting itself, the so-called self-employed labour in the informal sector produces cheap wage goods thereby enabling proletarian labour in

factories and farms, in turn, to provide cheap labour. Cheap labour and cheap food are the twin pillars on which stands the system of super-exploitation yielding super profits. Hundreds of rural youth migrating to the streets of African cities, the *wamachinga*, as they are called in Tanzania, are in effect subsidizing the costs of circulation of commodities, thereby enhancing the profits of merchant capital. The phenomenon of labour subsidizing capital, as opposed to the capitalist logic of labour-power exchanging at value underlying expanded reproduction, lies at the heart of the disarticulated process of accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession. Devaluation of peripheral labour and resources is the lynchpin in the exploitation and transfer of surplus from the periphery to the centre (Shivji, 2009, p. 67).

Commodification and privatization of health care, education, water, sanitation and removal of subsidies from essential foods which all formed part of the social wage goods previously means that now the poor have either to pay for it or go without. All in all, the materiality which underlies producers—peasants and pastoralists, proletarians and semi-proletarians, street hawkers selling consumer goods and peddlers selling cooked food, operators and repairers in backyard workshops—in virtually all sectors is the minimizing of their necessary consumption and maximizing their labour. I therefore proposed a modified definition of primitive accumulation under neoliberalism—*the process of surplus extraction by capital based on expropriation of a part of necessary consumption of the producer*. This is then the material basis common to all sectors of what I called the working people.

To be sure, the concept of the working people needs to be further theorized. What I have sketched above are only the first steps towards theorizing it. In the long *durée*, I have also attempted in discussions at the annual Summer Schools organized by the African Institute of Agrarian Studies to historicize the two tendencies of accumulation in the African periphery. From the Vasco da Gama era to colonialism, the dominant tendency was primitive accumulation that took the classical form of plunder of resources and human labour including turning human beings into chattels during the slave trade. Given the introduction of commodity economy, no doubt the tendency of accumulation through expanded reproduction was also introduced but this was not a dominant tendency. Following independence, various economic policies pursued by African governments, under whatever ideological rubric from nationalism, to liberalism to socialism, were meant to reinforce conditions for accumulation by expanded reproduction. The neoliberal assault with SAPs imposed by international financial institutions reinvigorated the old and new forms of primitive accumulation mentioned above. Primitive

accumulation became the dominant tendency. This is schematic, but I believe, provable.

While inchoate theorization does not allow me to take a position that working people is a class—whether in itself or for itself—I can perhaps assert more definitively that it *is* a ‘class’ against capital and has great potency in *political* discourse and mobilization. The potency of the concept of the working people was driven home to me in a trade union rally some years ago. I translated the term ‘working people’ into Swahili as *wavujajasho* (toilers). Together with its opposite *wavunajasho* (exploiters), it caught popular imagination and has more or less entered common usage. I believe politically, and even conceptually, the term working people has greater potency and validity than worker–peasant alliance. I would venture to say that even as a description of the agency for transformation the concept of working people sounds more sensible and convincing than worker–peasant alliance led by the proletariat or proletarian ideology. On a conceptual scale, therefore, the concept of working people is higher than worker–peasant alliance albeit lower than the concept of working class. Only real life struggles against the neoliberal phase of capitalist imperialism will help us further to theorize the concept of working people.

Note

1. We were acquainted with the ‘mode of production’ debate among Indian Marxists raging then in the pages of *Economic and Political Weekly*, which grappled with the issue of the relation between capital and the peasant, and the class alliances that it generated. The most prominent participant in that debate whose name I fondly remember was Utsa Patnaik. I had the pleasure of meeting and interacting with her several decades later the product of which was the publication of a small book *The Agrarian Question in the Neoliberal Era: Primitive Accumulation and the Peasantry* (Patnaik & Moyo, 2011)

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